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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ABUJA 002831

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SUBJECT: FRIENDS OF NIGERIA HEADS OF MISSION MEETING

Classified by Ambassador Howard F. Jeter. Reasons 1.5 (B & D).

1. (C) SUMMARY: Ambassador Jeter hosted a meeting with Chiefs of Mission of Germany, France, Canada, and the U.K. on October 7 to discuss upcoming Nigerian elections. The Ambassador identified the need to coordinate exchanges of information and to possibly develop coordinated policies among this "friends of Nigeria" group. The group came to broad consensus on the need to engage the Presidency and INEC over perceived shortcomings, particularly in voters registration, and to offer encouragement to Nigerian officials to improve the upcoming electoral process. The friends group agreed on the utility of regular meetings to discuss election issues, and scheduled a follow-on meeting October 15 to discuss the flawed voters registration process and the issue of international elections monitors. End Summary.

2. (C) Ambassador Jeter invited the Chiefs of Mission of Germany, France, Canada and the U.K. to meet October 7 to discuss the recently concluded voters registration exercise and possible coordination of diplomatic approaches to the GON on the electoral process. There was broad consensus on the current political situation in Nigeria, with all agreeing that the recent impeachment move was intended to prevent President Olusegun Obasanjo from seeking re-election. German Ambassador Dietmar Kreusel commented that the impeachment process was designed primarily to convince Obasanjo to withdraw his candidacy and that Obasanjo had lost most of his support in the North. With widespread disaffection and large portions of his own party turning against him, Kreusel speculated, Obasanjo will not be able to "save himself by just paying out money." The tone of Kreusel's statement implied that he wanted the group to be supportive of Obasanjo's reelection. The group agreed that the party conventions and gubernatorial elections would also provide the opportunity for further disorder in the political arena.

3. (C) All participants agreed that feedback from the registration process "was not great." The question, according to Canadian High Commissioner Howard Strauss, was whether it was conducted in a manner acceptable to Nigerians. Acting British High Commissioner Charles Bird concurred and commented that HMG would not be able to validate elections based solely on the results of this registration. Still, he wondered if it would be possible to work with its results and move forward if actions are taken to improve the registration and other pre-election preparations. One of the greatest difficulties identified by the group was that INEC appears to have no firm timeline for the conduct of the elections. Without this, according to French Ambassador Jean-Marc Simon, it is impossible to judge whether adequate preparations have been made. "The 1999 elections were not perfect, but this one could be worse," he concluded.

4. (C) The group then discussed broad outlines for an acceptable election. Bird cautioned that efforts by the international community should not be seen as biased towards or against any candidate, but rather should focus on the process. This was seconded by Ambassador Jeter. Bird said that HMG's goal is not just an election, but stability for Nigeria in its aftermath. There was no agreement on the benchmarks on which to judge the elections, especially on the "free-and-fair" standard; however, it was agreed that this subject would be the subject of future meetings. Bird stated that the HMG would accept elections which are "broadly acceptable to the majority of Nigerians and which are not challenged in the courts." There was some agreement among the guests that elections would not be conducted well, but that if the results are "reasonable and acceptable to Nigerians," the standards should be relaxed. However, cautioned Jeter, "we can not set a different standard for Nigeria."

5. (C) Kreusel said that the European Union (EU) had already agreed to a budget for observers for the Nigerian

elections; however the clear EU preference was for a mission designed to observe both electoral preparations and conduct. Two problems still facing any proposed observer mission were the lack of a timetable for elections and uncertainty of what the goals of the mission should be. Kreusel asked rhetorically whether it would be preferable to mount a strong mission, which would be subject to Nigerian elite criticism, or to back off and watch the process deteriorate. Jeter commented that U.S. observers will act independently from the USG, and we do not influence their conclusions. Kreusel confirmed similar expectations for the European observers. Bird warned that HMG viewed the 1999 elections as the baseline for expectations in 2003, and that the Nigerians should strive to improve on that performance.

16. (C) All participants agreed that three separate avenues should be explored: public statements supporting INEC's efforts and encouraging more effective action; collective approaches to INEC highlighting deficiencies in the process and pushing it to take responsibility; and individual but coordinated approaches to the Presidency with warnings of the dangers of failed elections. Kreusel suggested that the EU would discuss the issuance of a public statement to encourage rather than criticize the process at the earliest opportunity. Ambassador Jeter suggested that the USG would explore the issuance of a similar, parallel statement.

17. (C) COMMENT: All attendees at this meeting agreed that the registration process, as it stands, has serious deficiencies that create the potential for poisoning elections based on the exercise. The attendees also agreed that the process is salvageable. There is a similarity of Western views on the election process; however, there may be some divergence as the process moves forward, especially with the German and French. Nevertheless, the convening of this group appears to be a useful mechanism and we will continue with this initiative. We will await the formulation of the EU public statement; Embassy will develop a parallel statement, clearing it with Washington before the statement is issued.
JETER